

The Church Distinguished From a Sect.

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In entering upon the duty which I have assigned to myself in this article, it is proper, first of all, to ask, What is the mark of distinction between the Church of Christ and any sectarian church? What is it that makes the one the church? What is it that makes the other a sect? Most of us could, no doubt, resolve these questions after a fashion, with the allowance of sufficient time and abundant circumlocution; while but few of us, perhaps, would be ready with an answer at once succinct, authoritative and conclusive. This is owing largely to the fact that attempts to identify and differentiate the church have usually been made by cutting from different parts of the Scriptures what were regarded by the writer or speaker as its distinguishing marks and essential characteristics. However satisfactory this process may be to the man who does the cutting, and to those in sympathy with him, it is not equally convincing to an opponent or even to a neutral. It is in fact always open to the suspicion, whether well founded or not, that the texts relied upon have been selected under the direction of prepossession and partyism; that those alone have been brought out which seemed to be favorable to the party bringing them; that others having a different bearing, and exerting a modifying influence, have been passed over; and so the induction is assumed to be incomplete and vicious. It will be seen, therefore, that so far from settling the question and closing the controversy, this method is much more likely to keep it open and rife. Each party can determine in advance what it will regard as the essential marks of the church; it can then bring up its array of texts to show that the apostolic church possessed these marks; finally it can point out that it also possesses them; and so it will rest satisfied. Its neighbors, one after another, pursue the same course respecting what they regard as the essentials, establishing their claims and comforting their consciences by the same specious logic—and so we go.

Manifestly therefore, we need a better test—something simpler in its nature, and less liable to abuse in its application.

The one which I am about to propose has been virtually and, as it were, incidentally and tacitly employed by many, perhaps by all of us; but I am not aware that it has ever been distinctly set forth and urged as the test by which the church is distinguished from the sect. I allude to the Great Commission as recorded in the Gospels. To my mind this furnishes a ready, authoritative and conclusive means of determining and settling the whole question. But why make this the test in preference to any

other scripture? The question is pertinent, and the answer is ready. Because the original churches of Christ, antedating all sects, were generated and brought into being, *e. i.* they were made churches of Christ, simply by the observance of this commission. By this and nothing more, nothing less and nothing different. The New Testament which was subsequently developed, was developed out of the commission, for in substance it was all in it—concentrated there into small space, with definite and distinct outline, to serve as the rule for evangelistic guidance in the work of saving souls, and also as the intense focal light, by whose aid we can discriminate with precision and certainty between the church and a sect. And it is not clear that every congregation of men and women who have believed and do believe all that the commission teaches, and who have done and are doing all that it requires, is a Church of Christ? It must be that, for there is nothing else which it can be. It is not a sect, because it is the product of the commission, and this, when taken alone and taken in its entirety, does not produce sects. It never did, and it never can. Strictly and literally observed and followed, it produced the church originally, and thus followed it produces the church now. But any congregation *carving* from this commission—having, for example, its faith without its baptism, or its baptism without its faith—adding something to it here, and subtracting something from it there; or tearing it into pieces and reconstructing it to suit its own preconceived notions; putting baptism before faith, or predicting and demanding remission before baptism—every such congregation is a sect, and not the Church of Christ.

The final elements in the commission—teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you—is, from its very nature, necessarily progressive and and gradual in its practical observance. It is the means whereby are maintained and perpetuated the church life and character generated by the observance of the other elements. It constitutes, therefore, the proper and only authorized test of continued church fellowship. The man, once introduced into the church, who is daily learning to observe and do all things commanded by Christ, is to be retained in the church—and this regardless of any honest peculiar opinions which he may privately hold.

The test above proposed is free from complication or uncertainty; it is readily and easily applied to any given case; it is comprehensive embracing the whole New Testament; it is in the highest degree authoritative for the purpose designated; and, being such, those who employ it are relieved in doing so of all just suspicion of unfairness or of partisan artifice.

In the light thus brought before

us it must appear that, as the different congregations of the disciples have been called out of the world and gathered together simply and solely by the literal observance of the commission, without the slightest addition, subtraction or change; and that as they make the doing of Christ's commandments, or the maintenance of proper Christian character, the test of continued fellowship; they may rightfully and without immodesty claim to be churches of Jesus Christ, and not a sect.

The existence of the sects by which we are surrounded constitutes, however, as intimated in a previous article, a standing menace, endangering the integrity of this lofty character. In the first place, this circumstance has caused us to preach and to publish a goodly number of truths and views with reference to the original acceptance of the Gospel or to the subsequent life of the Christian. Certainly we esteem them as being in many respects important. They are helpful, strengthening, comforting, edifying. In some cases they serve to disabuse the mind of a hurtful prejudice; in others they satisfy a doubt or a difficulty; or they happily dissipate darkness and obscurity—shadows upon the pathway of truth which have been cast by theology and sectarianism; and so, for one good reason or another, we can hardly avoid giving them emphasis and prominence. We look for example, views of justification by faith, which are peculiar to ourselves; and we feel it incumbent upon us to present and urge these views, because they show that the doctrine of justification by faith, as taught in the epistles and elsewhere, is consistent with the commission, and with the preaching and practice of the apostles under it.

Again, as to the genesis of faith in the human heart, we are peculiar in teaching that it is not a direct and miraculous impartation immediately from God, but that he produces it by means of the truth; that it comes as the normal result of hearing and attentively considering the word of God. We are well aware that this result may be, and in many cases is, produced in persons who have not at all considered the modus of its production; who know nothing, and perhaps care nothing about it; nay, who may even have erroneous views respecting it. Still, as men are generally taught by sectarian preachers to depend upon and wait for some supernatural and super-*evangelical* influence in order to faith, we feel constrained to emphasize and argue the antagonistic view, so as to induce them to apply their minds *at once* to the consideration of the truth.

In like manner we give prominence to the doctrine of Scripture respecting the design of baptism. We do so because the current ecclesiastical teaching on the meaning of

this ordinance is erroneous and misleading—turning man from the truth, and substituting a modern and unauthorized practice in place of a commandment in the commission.

(Concluded next week.)

Be Social.

A young man comes to your church; he is a perfect stranger to the majority of those he meets; his home is far away; his church he has left behind. He listens attentively to the service, and is pleased and profited by what he hears. The service over, he goes out. Although many know him to be a stranger, yet no one extends the friendly hand or in any manner notices him. He is somewhat discouraged, a little homesickness steals over him, but he resolves to go there once more. He goes, with the same result. Discouraged, he seeks another sanctuary where the warm grasp of the hand, information about the evening meeting, invitation to the Sunday school, and the interest taken by the members of the church in his welfare, at once decides his course. The result is, a zealous worker is gained by one church and lost by the other, and simply because the young men were social.

Young men and young women of our churches, never let a stranger go away without notice; never let that chilling feeling of loneliness come over any person in the house of God. It should be your pleasure to make every stranger at home. Try it, and your reward will be speedy.—Zion's Watchman.

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